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APPROPRIATION BILL (No. 4) 1990-91

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Speech in the context of a Bill (Second Reading)

Speaker: Gibson Mr G.D.

Electorate: MORETON
Party: ALP
Government: YES

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APPROPRIATION BILL (No. 4) 1990-91
Second Reading

Mr GIBSON (Moreton) (6.58)-In this debate on Appropriation Bill (No.4), Appropriation Bill (No. 5) and Appropriation (Parliamentary Departments) Bill (No. 2) I will spend some time on an issue relevant to the activities of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade: the illegal annexation of East Timor by Indonesia and the Australian Government's acquiescence in this action. The Australian Government's position on East Timor has not been debated much in this chamber for a number of years, although mention was made of it during debate on Australia's involvement in the Gulf war, when contrasts were drawn between our responses to the two invasions.

Having recently visited East Timor as part of an Australian parliamentary delegation to Indonesia, I believe it is timely that I remind this House of some facts about this small but very important territory so close to Australia's shores. Until April 1974 East Timor was a colonial territory of Portugal. During that month a coup in Portugal brought to power a new regime committed to withdrawal from its colonial possessions. The new Government spelt out three options for consideration by the East Timorese: semi-independence but with continued association with Portugal; full independence; or integration with Indonesia. Within a few weeks political groupings emerged within the population which basically reflected the three options being offered by the Portuguese. These were the Democratic Union of Timor (UDT), which supported semi-independence under Portugal; the ASDT, which later became Fretilin, which sought full independence; and Apodeti, which wanted incorporation with Indonesia.

Over the next few months the UDT and Fretilin initially came closer together to work towards a process of independence. It was very clear during this time that Apodeti, the party seeking incorporation into Indonesia, had very little support amongst the 700,000 people of East Timor. Differences and tensions began to emerge between the two main parties, which were exacerbated by continued political upheaval in Portugal. This culminated in August 1975 in an attempt by UDT to take over East Timor and become the sole political voice for the process of independence. Fretilin strongly opposed this action and a civil war erupted between these two opposing forces. In late August the Portuguese governor and his staff left East Timor because of the conflict-an action that would ultimately lead to the invasion by Indonesia.

During this conflict, UDT and Apodeti received some support from the Indonesian military and some forces did cross the border between West and East Timor to engage Fretilin forces. Fretilin overcame the UDT and by 11 October 1975 they had gained virtually full control over the territory. They established a transitional administration. Portugal refused to recognise Fretilin's control and it was still regarded by both Indonesia and the rest of the world as the legitimate controlling authority in East Timor.

On 28 November the Fretilin transitional government declared East Timor an independent democratic republic and announced that some 50 African and Asian countries had pledged support for the new republic. The Portuguese Government again rejected the Fretilin declaration as well as a statement made on 29 November by Apodeti and the Indonesian Government which said that Fretilin's action had removed the last remains of Portuguese sovereignty and declared East Timor to be part of Indonesian territory.

On 7 December, Indonesia made a full scale invasion of East Timor, seized the capital, Dili, and drove the Fretilin supporters into the hills. So began a process of war by the Indonesian military forces against the people of East Timor. By the end of December that year 20,000 Indonesian soldiers were in East Timor and over 10,000 East Timorese had been killed by either fighting or through arrest and torture.

These dates are significant for honourable members to note because there has been a common accusation made that the Whitlam Government allowed the invasion to occur and took no action. In fact, Australia was in the throes of its constitutional crisis in October 1975 when the initial struggle between

Fretilin and UDT was occurring. Whitlam was sacked on 11 November, 17 days before the Fretilin declaration of independence. Malcolm Fraser was in control when the full invasion by Indonesia occurred. The election campaign was in full swing and neither side of politics was particularly interested in the events occurring in East Timor. It was, in fact, the Fraser Government which in 1978 formally recognised the de facto annexation of East Timor by Indonesia in an attempt to improve diplomatic relations.

The United Nations has consistently condemned the Indonesian invasion and demanded withdrawal of all its military forces. There have been 10 resolutions carried by the General Assembly and the Security Council since 7 December 1975 on East Timor. All have been ignored by Indonesia. When one reads the language contained in these resolutions and compares them to those of the Security Council in 1990 regarding Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, there are overwhelming similarities. In fact, the Secretary-General of the United Nations agrees that the two actions are very similar in nature and were unlawful, unjust and immoral.

The war between Fretilin forces and the Indonesian military continued with full force for several years from 1975 and is estimated to have cost over 100,000 lives. Resistance continues to this day despite a brutal campaign of suppression by the Indonesian Army. In 1984 a severe famine occurred throughout the territory and this, compounded by widespread disease spread through poor drainage, sanitation and lack of water, is estimated to have killed almost another 100,000 Timorese.

In 1986, the UDT announced that it had joined forces with Fretilin in fighting for the independence of East Timor. All through the 1980s reports of military offences, including aerial bombardment, have been made with eyewitness accounts of massacres and other atrocities. Detailed reports of massive human rights abuses, including beatings, torture, murder and widespread disappearances of people suspected of inciting unrest, have been published by Amnesty International and other recognised and respected agencies.

Many attempts have been made by the Indonesian authorities to capture or kill the Commander of the Fretilin forces, Jose Xanana Gusmao, without success. In October 1989, the Pope visited Indonesia, including East Timor, and widespread anti-Indonesian demonstrations occurred in Dili and elsewhere which were brutally suppressed by the security forces. In January 1990, a visit by the United States Ambassador to Indonesia prompted further protests which were again violently dispersed by the armed forces. Reports of torture, beatings and disappearances were repeated, and many youths sought sanctuary in the Catholic Church in Dili for protection from the Indonesian military. In October and November of 1990 another crackdown on unrest and new military offences against Fretilin forces in the hills occurred. These activities are still occurring to a lesser degree at the moment.

In February 1991, I participated in an Australian parliamentary delegation to Indonesia at the invitation of the Indonesian Parliament. As part of that visit our delegation spent three days in East Timor, at our request. Our trip to Indonesia generally was a positive and worthwhile exercise and the members of our delegation learnt a great deal in their discussions with Indonesian Ministers, politicians and officials about trade and investment opportunities. We canvassed improved tourism and educational links between our two nations. We were well received throughout our eight-day stay in Indonesia and our hosts were friendly, cooperative and helpful.

My concerns about Indonesia's actions in East Timor and my opposition to its incorporation in no way reduces my belief that Australia and Indonesia need to continue to develop close working relationships for our two nations' mutual benefit. I respect Indonesia's efforts to improve the social and economic conditions of its people. I do, however, have very strong objections to its actions in East Timor and will continue my efforts to gain freedom, justice and the right to self-determination for the people of East Timor. My visit in February to East Timor confirmed the fact that Indonesia is able to maintain its control over the territory only through a heavy military presence and acts of brutality against the people.

Our delegation had meetings with the Catholic Bishop of Dili, Bishop Belo, with representatives of the International Committee of the Red Cross and with Australian journalists who had met with Fretilin representatives. They all confirmed, in some detail, that human rights abuses including harassment, arrest without trial,

beatings, torture and disappearances of suspected activists are still regular events. Their information confirmed the reports we had received from Amnesty International. Even the Indonesian appointed Governor of East Timor, Mr Carrascalao, confirmed in private discussions that his efforts to rebuild the economic and social fabric of East Timor were constantly undermined with the brutal repression of the Indonesian military.

Our delegation was given little opportunity to talk with local people and to hear their views on the current situation and whether they would choose to stay as part of Indonesia. We were continuously supervised by a number of military, intelligence and Government officials wherever we travelled. Our hotel in Dili was surrounded at all times by security forces, and if any member of the delegation-I did on four separate occasions-left the hotel to walk the local streets and shops, he was followed by three or four intelligence officers. The local people would not even look at us when we walked past. They knew that their every movement was watched.

Hundreds of troops were on the streets of Dili for the whole of our visit. It was reported to us by Bishop Belo that a number of leaders of the resistance movement had been rounded up and imprisoned just before our arrival. We had expected a demonstration to occur during our visit, but the presence of security forces was so heavy that I was not surprised that none occurred.

East Timor's whole environment reeks of occupation and suppression. There is no normal social community activity or willingness to engage freely in conversation or recreation. The economy is massively depressed. Health problems are still widespread, with malaria and other diseases prevalent. There is no reliable water supply or proper drainage. The Government is still reliant on 95 per cent of its income from Indonesia to develop community infrastructure and facilities.

I have always opposed the successive Australian governments' position on East Timor, and my trip in February confirmed the correctness of this position. Australia's consent to the invasion and annexation of East Timor and, therefore, its acceptance of the suppression, torture and murder of its citizens is a disgraceful act for which we have been criticised around the world. This policy is in total contradiction to the often stated principles and tenets of our foreign policy. As a free, peaceful, progressive democratic society, Australia has taken strong stands on innumerable occasions in support of these fundamental objectives.

Our position has only very recently been reaffirmed publicly in a presentation by the Australian Government representative at the United Nations Commission on Human Rights at its forty-seventh session held on 1 February 1991 in Geneva. Mr John McCarthy, head of the International Organisations and Legal Division of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, confirmed Australia's strong support for the principles of self-determination. I quote Mr McCarthy:

Self-determination is not only of fundamental value in itself but is a basic condition of individual freedom.

And further:

The denial of the right to self-determination goes beyond traditional colonialism, to include situations of foreign intervention.

Hear, hear! I could not agree more. For the next six pages of Mr McCarthy's speech, he outlines situations and places around the world where these principles have not been honoured. He cites Australia's support for the just struggles of the peoples of Namibia, Kuwait, Cambodia, the Baltic states and Myanmar and the Palestinian people, and even cites the need for a much better treatment for Australia's Aboriginal population. Yet there is one glaring and damaging omission-East Timor. The United Nations still recognises Portugal as the controlling authority for East Timor. Most countries do not recognise Indonesia's annexation.

I am a member of a group in this Parliament called Parliamentarians for East Timor. There are over 40 members of this group from all parties and both Houses who do not agree with the Australian Government's position on East Timor. We continue to support the need for an internationally recognised process of self- determination for the people of East Timor and an end to the abuses of human rights and repression that continue to occur. Parliamentarians for East Timor is an international group, represented in 15 parliaments with over 240 members of parliament as members.

I recently had the honour of representing the Australian group in a delegation which met with the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Mr Javier Perez de Cuellar, in New York. Six members of the international Parliamentarians for East Timor group spent 30 minutes with Mr Perez de Cuellar and a further 30 minutes with Mr Achmed, the Under Secretary-General responsible for humanitarian affairs in South East Asia. Mr Perez de Cuellar confirmed that the resolutions of the United Nations on East Timor were still in force and were the framework within which he was working to bring about a peaceful resolution. He said that the struggle of the East Timorese for self-determination was of equal importance to the struggles of the people of Namibia, the Western Sahara, the Baltic states and elsewhere around the world.

The United Nations does not prioritise the struggles for freedom and justice of people. Its problem is that there are so many instances of people suffering repression and abuses of human rights that it has difficulty in actively pursuing all such causes. Mr Perez de Cuellar confirmed that Portugal is still recognised as the controlling authority for East Timor, and Portugal legally speaks on behalf of the East Timorese. He did concede that the United Nations had spoken with Fretilin representatives on a number of occasions and recognised their legitimacy as a voice of the people. The United Nations is concerned at the regular and reliable reports of violence and abuses of human rights emanating from East Timor. It is a matter that Mr Perez de Cuellar has raised on two occasions with Indonesian President Soeharto and a number of times with Foreign Minister Alitas.

The Secretary-General is hopeful that the final outstanding matters delaying a proposed Portuguese parliamentary visit to East Timor have been resolved and that the trip will be held in the next few weeks. If the trip is successful, it is hoped that an improved dialogue between Portugal and Indonesia will result.

An interesting and potentially significant comment made by the Secretary-General related to the nature of the process of self-determination. Mr Perez de Cuellar admitted that it was highly unlikely Indonesia would allow a full and open plebiscite of all East Timorese to occur. He said that the United Nations accepted a number of different processes for determining the will of the people and such would be so in East Timor. He suggested that the nature of East Timor's involvement in the next round of Indonesian elections could well signal to the international community the feelings and views of the people about their continued incorporation in Indonesia.

What was clear from our discussions with Mr Perez de Cuellar was that the international community continues to oppose and abhor Indonesia's actions in East Timor. Until the rights of these people are observed and peace, freedom and justice are returned, Indonesia will not be able to take its place on the international stage as a respected nation. The signing of the Timor Gap treaty between Australia and Indonesia exposes the real motivation behind our nation's deviation from its fundamental foreign policy principles-oil.

During the Gulf war, many who opposed our involvement accused the United States and others of being motivated more by the economic ramifications of Saddam Hussein's actions than by the human rights perspective. Regardless of the motivations, I ultimately came down on the side of those who said that Saddam Hussein's annexation of Kuwait was wrong and that he had to be stopped. I did so because of my fundamental belief in the principles of peace, freedom, justice and human rights. These are the same principles that have been the basis of Australia's foreign policy objectives and which have been badly abused in our response to East Timor.

We may well receive our comeuppance when the International Court of Justice rules on Portugal's objection to the Timor Gap treaty. I would hate to be perceived as disloyal, but I do hope that the International Court rules in Portugal's favour because, irrespective of the fine legal arguments, the moral position is clear. Indonesia has no right to East Timor or its resources and Australia should be ashamed of its actions in accepting Indonesian hegemony over East Timor and its people.

We have allowed oil and its economic benefits to corrupt our foreign policy and we stand condemned in the eyes of the free world because of this action. The people of East Timor will continue to struggle for their rights to live as a free independent nation. I shall continue to fight for their right to the future they wish to enjoy. Australia will continue to suffer the criticism of its peers until it changes its position on this territory.